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David Schur, Plato's Wayward Path: Literary Form and the Republic. Washington, DC: Center for Hellenic Studies, 2015. Pp. 144. Paper (ISBN 978-0-674-41721-2) \$22.50.

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Readers committed to the approach to Platonic literature typically found in the scholarship of the twentieth century will be challenged by this small book. It “enquires into Plato’s methods of writing, and it addresses modern methods of reading Plato” (ix). The author, David Schur, summarizes the content of the book as follows: “The first half of the book is devoted to reconsidering the modern problem of literary form in Plato and to developing a coherent and, for the most part, broadly applicable response. The second half focuses on Plato’s *Republic*, offering analyses of structure and wording” (x). For those who read the *Republic* as a compendium of Platonic views, the second part of this short work will seem puzzling indeed.

To begin, Schur lays out what he calls “the problem of literary form” (3) in Plato’s works using Friedrich Schleiermacher’s understanding of the relationship between form and content in Plato’s dialogues as a benchmark. Schleiermacher maintained that all literary form in Plato’s dialogues, when rightly understood, supports the philosophical content and leads the reader to Plato’s conclusions. A large contingent among contemporary scholars follows this tradition, seeking a holistic approach which pays attention to literary aspects of Plato’s writing. For Schur, however, a basic problem remains: readers assume that Plato has left a plain statement of his philosophy hidden in the dialogue form, and so, “Uncooperative features of the text are thus destined to be ironed out (justified, straightened) after the fact” (13). If this is so, it is a real problem.

Accordingly, for Schur, so long as readers continue to look for a univocal expository statement of Platonic philosophy in the dialogues, they will be tripped up by “the tortuous language” in Plato’s “profoundly experimental writings” (25), and so they will be forced to “tamper with the evidence” (33). Instead, readers are urged to take up the new rhetoric of criticism, identifying non-didactic “patterns and structures of language” and connecting them with “significant functions and effects” in

literary passages (36). This approach leaves readers focused on the way the text itself works and not on what the text is meant to be telling them. Here, as Schur himself acknowledges (37), he will lose a goodly number of traditional classicists and philosophers, who understand Plato to be leading readers to particular philosophical conclusions, albeit in curious ways.

In chapter three, Schur describes in general how a modern literary interpretation would see the *Republic*. Readers not inured to modern literary criticism will probably not be convinced that one improves on a traditional approach by following two practices described as: 1) the recognition of verbal patterns “essentially by allocating attention and interest” (patterns which are “construed in different ways by different readers”), and 2) the allowance of “ample consideration to multiple, concurrent meanings when deciding what is important” (44). For Schur, however, a close examination such patterns in Plato’s writing reveals an overwhelming presence (“unusually saturated” [51], “endemic” [55]) of modality, by which he means the qualification of a statement or a series of statements “as more or less remote from certainty” or as merely “possible or probable” (49).

Proposing that modality “offers a useful way to understand a major function of literary form” (49) in Plato’s writing, he arrives at a *Republic* in which important things are discussed by characters who can reach no philosophical conclusions, and in which Plato commits to nothing. Whether this modalizing comes from Plato’s use of “statements explicitly qualified by various lexical elements,” conversations filled with “questions, commands and exhortations,” or arguments thick with “hypothetical conjectures, proposals, conditions, and forecasts” (51), Schur maintains that it limits any statement of certainty or reality which might be taken as a Platonic claim, serves to create a measure of uncertainty among the characters, and leaves readers at a distance from any sought philosophical goals. Thus, far from the literary form of the dialogue purposefully supporting Platonic conclusions (à la Schleiermacher), any movement toward a Platonic position in the conversation between Socrates and his interlocutors is purposefully thwarted by a ubiquitous sentential modality. Moreover, Schur reckons that large scale structural features in the *Republic* amplify the modal quality of the conversation as it stymies the heuristic search for justice and produces an atmosphere of uncertainty.

The second part of this book contains detailed interpretative analyses of the language and structure of several passages in the *Republic* using the rhetorical critical approach described in the opening chapters. The major premise of these analyses is that the *Republic* is not so much a philosophical study as a study of a philosophical study, which “offers an interesting and sustained reflection on method” (60). Thus

the *Republic* as a whole, according to Schur, is not meant to move readers to a fixed and certain philosophical goal, but to present the philosophical enterprise as “an ongoing, unending exploration of possibilities” (60).

Schur sets down the topos of “the path” (61) as a first step in the study of modality in the *Republic*. Taking up the opening scene of the dialogue along with the opening and closing paragraphs of the Myth of Er, he argues that the journeys (i.e., the paths) of Socrates and Er speak to the *Republic’s* concern with method. Of course, not every detail seems equally convincing. For example, to suggest that Socrates’ stroll to Piraeus to witness the parade of citizens at the festival of Bendis (“a physical journey whose purpose was to watch...how some very small physical journeys proceed,” 67) somehow “anticipates” the self-reflective, open-ended journey of the characters of the *Republic* seems a stretch.

In chapter five, Schur identifies passages in which the characters discuss difficulties with the process of defining justice by means of the creation of the best city (82). In each case they discuss the proper methodology to be used in the dialogue, and thus process becomes the content of the discussion. Reliance on un-asserted or unclaimed propositions as the basis for taking up a new argument, or for resetting an old one, depicts the characters’ involvement in “methodological evasion” (87) which, according to Schur, perpetuates the search for philosophical goals and turns the project into an endless pursuit with no hope of an eventual certainty.

Lastly, Schur focuses on “the Cave”, which he describes as a “hypothetical scenario” (99) rather than an allegory, and which follows in sequence after Socrates’ refusal to give a clear definition of the Good and his opting instead to deliver the figures of the Sun and Divided Line. As a result, the likeness of the Cave is not understood by Schur as some sort of ultimate fictional narrative which is meant to draw us nearer to the Good, but as a theoretical likeness of what would be our human experience under certain conditions, told in a digressive sequence ending with the likely destruction of the philosopher.

This brief book will undoubtedly drive readers back to the *Republic* to reconsider issues and interpretations, and its bibliography gives useful direction for secondary readings.